



The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

Papers downloaded from AgEcon Search may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.

No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.



BOOK REVIEW

Village India: Change and Continuity

Awanish Kumar*

Himanshu, Jha, Praveen, and Rodgers, Gerry (eds.) (2016), *The Changing Village in India: Insights from Longitudinal Research*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 592, Rs 1095.

VILLAGE STUDIES IN INDIA

In the *Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company* (1812, cited in Srinivas 1987, p. 21), the village was described as “the most basic unit of social organisation in India, a sovereign whole, irrespective of the transfer of power from kingdoms to regimes at the national or regional level.” In 1832, Charles Metcalfe famously termed Indian villages “little republics” that were ‘almost independent of foreign relations’ (*ibid.*). It was “during British rule that India was first essentialised as a land of ‘village republics’” (Jodhka 1998, p. 2). Further, even though most “oriental” economies were agrarian, it was only India that was characterised as being essentially a land of villages, a characterisation intended to serve colonial interests (Inden 1990, cited in Jodhka 2002, p. 3343).

The pioneers of village studies in India, Harold Mann and Gilbert Slater, were economists by training (see Thorner 1967; Slater 1918; Hockings 1999). Their research provided detailed qualitative and quantitative information on land and asset ownership, forms of caste discrimination, settlement patterns, cropping patterns, cultivation practices, credit relations, and modes of tenancy. Following Independence, the number of students of social anthropology and economics carrying out village studies in the country increased.

The discipline of sociology in India in its early days was influenced by social anthropology, and “anthropological issues like ritual and kinship [were] studied more than mobility and equality” (Sundar *et al.* 2000, p. 1999). Louis Dumont, who

* Tata Institute of Social Sciences, awanishkumar86@gmail.com

belonged to the structural-functional school of thought, believed that rather than villages, caste should be the unit of study of Indian society (see Beteille 1974, 1979; Harriss 2008). In an early intervention in the first issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, titled “For a Sociology of India,” Dumont and Pocock wrote that the village as a unit of analysis was untenable as an Indian village did not constitute a “community” owing to deeply entrenched caste distinctions (Harriss 2008). Around the same time, many village studies were being conducted by social anthropologists in India (see, for instance, Beteille 1996; Gough 1989; Epstein *et al.* 1998; Marriott 1955; Mayer 1960; Srinivas 1957, 1987), and this led to fundamental debates around the issues of village, caste, and community. While the village could be considered a useful unit of study, it had to be located in a regional or national context to offer useful conceptual tools that could be applied across the country (see Dasgupta 1975; Marriott 1955; Mayer 1960; Nagaraj 2008).

Two separate sets of questions dominated village studies in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Jodhka 1998). While sociological studies analysed the village as a unit of social and cultural moral order, a new sub-discipline of agrarian studies focused on economic and rural power structures. However, many studies do not fit either category. Beteille (1974), for instance, falls somewhere between the “functionalist” tradition of peasant village studies and the “political economy” tradition of agrarian studies. On the other hand, Harriss (1982, 2008) argues that a distinction should be made between the study of caste relations and agrarian class relations. Village studies as a methodology must engage with the dynamics and contradictions of a society, and adopt an inductive-inferential and value-accommodating approach rather than a deductive-positivistic and value-neutral one (Mukherjee 1976).

KEY DEBATES IN VILLAGE STUDIES

Social science research in India that undertakes intensive primary data-based case studies has mostly considered the village as its basic unit of analysis. This can be traced to an understanding that every village is a specific socio-economic system, the organisation of which influences socio-economic relationships within the village (see Dasgupta 1978; Connell and Lipton 1977). Jayaraman and Lanjouw (1999, p. 1) contend that this method of village studies not only provides a more “contextualised and grounded perspective on the life of rural households; highlighting relationships between households and their surrounding community and illustrating the role of village institutions,” but also helps evaluate the reliability of information from large-scale surveys, documents diverse experiences of heterogeneous villages, emphasises difference, and inspires further research on specific issues of village life in India. In village studies, socio-cultural environments and production conditions are important factors in determining the living and working conditions of people in villages. For instance, village studies can study the interconnectedness of class, caste, and gender contradictions at the village level, and how these determine and in turn are determined by diverse processes of social change.

However, village studies in India are not limited to specific issues concerning village societies. In terms of methodology, at least in the long term, they incorporate social-anthropological and political economy approaches. A number of important studies, such as Breman (1974), Harriss (1982), and Ramachandran (1990), suggest that village studies should be multidisciplinary, and examine different aspects of material and non-material lives in local, regional, national, and global contexts (also see Dasgupta 1975; Nagaraj 2008). Hoben and Timberg (1980) point to the complementarity between village studies and macro data, and the depth and validity of village studies as a methodology. Harriss (2008, p. 5) argues that village studies must focus on the “analysis of the inter-relations of different dimensions of social life – kinship, religion and ritual, and politics; as well as caste and class.” In this understanding, the village remains “a conjuncture of much wider processes and relationships” (Harriss 1982, p. 17).

The very nature of village studies ensures that (as is not the case with other survey methods) “unconventional” opinions and views in respect of social, political, and ecological factors from respondents can be recorded (Omvedt 1979, p. 767). In a society such as India, with limited capitalist transformation, the agrarian question needs to be analysed within a methodological framework where political economy concerns of documenting historical changes in agrarian relations are supplemented by an understanding of the contextual processes involved in transition. Here, processes at the local village level and macroeconomic changes (or issues of class and caste) form the components of the “mutual determination of part and whole” in a dialectical unity (Harriss 1982, pp. 16–17). The framework of village studies also allows us to move beyond the analytical dualities of ideology and action, of class and caste, and of meanings and reality, by integrating social reality with political action (Herring and Agarwala 2006; Harriss 1982). This framework works on the basis of an inductive approach where diversity in the form and modes of agrarian relations is expected, and, in fact, is part of the research design (Byres 1986, p. 19).

One of the important contributions of the volume under review is that it foregrounds economic and social *change* in village India against the perception of *fixity* that has been associated with village societies since the colonial period. Another significant contribution of the volume is that it is a collection of research papers and articles (17 chapters in all, including an introduction) based exclusively on longitudinal research with the village as the central unit of analysis. Both at the level of theory and practice of village studies, the introduction by the editors of the volume raises crucial questions. *First*, the longitudinal approach to village studies presupposes the existence of a baseline. An important concern of village studies is to document change at the village level in order to comment on development and the impact of public policy. The village, however, changes as does its relationship with the world outside; as the editors’ introduction notes, “in comparing a village at two points in time, one is not really comparing like with like” (*ibid.*, p. 9). *Secondly*, there is a choice between focusing on a single village with a highly trained set of researchers,

as opposed to collecting data from a sample of households located in different villages. Both approaches have their advantages and the editors of the volume note that these approaches are complementary. *Thirdly*, the relationship between the observer and the observed is the focus of a number of issues of research. Obviously, the long-term engagement required of this approach cannot leave the observer untouched and unbiased. Further, the observer changes over time with respect to approach and insight, or a new set of researchers takes over the longitudinal project. Repeated interactions with village households (in some cases, generations of them) has both advantages and disadvantages. *Lastly*, the editors of the volume point to the fact that most longitudinal studies are not actually planned as such. This leads to problems of data availability, comparability of data, and data management.

UNDERSTANDING AGRARIAN SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH VILLAGE STUDIES

The volume under review has 17 chapters. Three broad concerns are addressed in the volume: the methodology of longitudinal village studies, understanding change through “wide and integrated accounts of particular villages” (*ibid.*, p. 14), and exploring special themes within the framework of the second concern. The chapters are not divided into separate sections, though a broad classification is present. The first set of three chapters (chapters 2 to 4) discusses methodological issues and challenges in longitudinal village-based research. The second set of six chapters (chapters 5 to 10) discusses broader patterns of social and economic change, citing different longitudinal village study projects across India. The final set of seven chapters (chapters 11 to 17) takes up particular issues such as non-farm diversification, caste and gender relations, migration, and public services in specific settings.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 by John Harriss, Patricia Jeffrey, and Shapan Adnan, respectively, provide detailed and often personalised accounts of longitudinal research of particular villages. Harriss provides a summary of the research conducted in the Slater villages, first by Slater and his students, and later by other researchers including Harriss and his colleagues. His arguments relate to the fact that data from many of these studies have not been preserved, which makes it difficult to document change in these villages. Two issues that Harriss points to here are of particular importance for young researchers. The first is the relative absence of contextualisation in village studies. Only a few such projects have studied a cluster of villages that can provide a regional account of change and difference. The second point, made by Harriss-White and Harriss and quoted in the chapter, is that:

rigorously replicated resurveys of whole villages have never yet been undertaken. They do not seem to be possible. Both researchers and the researched change, and, through both contact and reflection, they each change one another. (Himanshu, Jha, and Rodgers 2016, p. 32)

The chapter by Patricia Jeffrey is an account of her research in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, over the last three and a half decades. One of her observations in the chapter relates

to the process of developing an understanding between the researcher and the researched. Initially, the researched considers any external person – either associated with the government or with an agency connected to the government – as a threat. However, Jeffrey notes, living in the midst of the village community makes way for better understanding over time. Her long-term engagement with Bijnor has resulted in several insights into change and continuity in the region. Methodological learning is of immense significance for village study. Jeffrey emphasises that data collected through ethnographic studies and re-studies are confidential, and analyses the problems of preserving non-anonymous field notes for future research. The challenges of familiarity and objectivity are ever-present for an ethnographer.

The chapter by Shapan Adnan is on Bangladesh, the only study in the volume from outside India. Adnan defines long-term village studies (LTVS) to include repeat studies that attempt to track change through revisits and one-time studies that reconstruct the past through oral histories. He suggests that LTVS are useful in discerning the interactions and relationships between households and groups in a village, which may not always be visible in short-term studies. According to Adnan, the major weaknesses of this approach are its incomplete coverage and lack of representativeness, both of which can be minimised by means of supplementary tools. Longitudinal village studies also suffer from problems such as comparability, which manifest themselves in multiple ways. First, these studies only map *comparative-static* differences, and try to infer the events and processes in the intervening period. Secondly, the “problem definitions” of the original study and the re-study are, more often than not, different from each other, resulting in long-term data that cannot be compared. The study area itself may undergo change, apart from the fact that the research questions employed by the (same or different) researcher at different points in time may be radically different. Differences in political outlook and research design may lead to different conclusions from longitudinal studies of the same area.

The second set of chapters begins with a paper by Himanshu and Nicholas Stern on Palanpur village in Uttar Pradesh. Palanpur is a unique village in that it has been the site of six surveys since Independence – one every decade. This chapter is based on two of the most intensive survey rounds, one conducted in 1983–4 and another in 2008–10. The authors list three key factors that have been drivers of change in Palanpur: population and demographic change, modernisation of agriculture, and expansion of non-farm opportunities. Over the last 25 years, they note, the third factor has become the most important. Many changes that have occurred in Palanpur have occurred also in other parts of India. To begin with, the pressure of population on land and agriculture has eased owing to migration and new technologies. Yields have improved and wages in agriculture have gone up. Literacy rates and school enrolment have risen. However, levels of inequality have increased and public services are inadequate. Tenancy in the village has not declined.

The next chapter in this set, by Gerry Rodgers, Sunil K. Mishra, and Alakh N. Sharma, presents findings from a similar longitudinal engagement with some villages in Bihar. The interesting aspect of the Bihar dataset is that it contains panel data on households. Broadly speaking, the findings show that landless households have remained landless though the attached labour system has ceased to exist. Migration, non-farm employment, and remittance income have changed the villages in diverse ways, with an associated impact on caste and gender relations at the micro level. However, the agrarian structure has remained the same, with landed households at the top gaining more from migration than other classes. Polarisation with regard to land holdings and incomes has deepened.

Surinder S. Jodhka's chapter on Haryana revisits his doctoral work in the State. Social hierarchy and the system of attached labour have weakened to a significant degree in the study villages. Dalits, almost all of them landless in the villages under study, have rejected the village community by withdrawing from agricultural labour. Beneficiaries of the green revolution have diversified their sources of income and the current generation does not show any interest in agriculture.

The chapter by Ravi Srivastava revisits a village in eastern Uttar Pradesh first surveyed by the author with G. K. Lieten in 1994 as part of a six-village survey and resurveyed by the author in 2012. Upper-caste landed domination continues in the village, with Dalits almost exclusively performing agricultural labour, alongside an expansion of opportunities in the non-agricultural sector. Both Dalits and OBCs (Other Backward Classes) were less dependent on Brahmin households for livelihood and employment than before; however, OBCs benefited more from migration and remittance incomes. The processes of economic change and political mobilisation in northern India influenced the relative positions of different caste groups in the village.

The chapter by Praveen Jha and Avanindra Nath Thakur presents findings from repeated visits to some villages in Purnea district in Bihar. It highlights the continued investment in agriculture and purchase of agricultural equipment such as tractors and threshers by landed households in the region. Access to owned and operational land holdings was on the decline for labouring households, and leasing in land from other social groups was not beneficial for various reasons. Non-agricultural work included work in brick kilns and provided some relief to labouring households in the form of higher wages.

The final chapter in this section by John Harriss and J. Jeyaranjan discusses findings from a number of village studies in Tamil Nadu. The authors begin by characterising Tamil Nadu as a "post-agrarian" State that cannot be analysed using the framework for other States because of high levels of urbanisation in Tamil Nadu. The nature of work has changed in rural Tamil Nadu, with manual workers travelling for work to urban centres or migrating to cities for longer periods. In villages as well, non-agricultural opportunities have led to a general diversification

of occupations and work profiles. This transition has taken place alongside stagnation in agriculture over the last few decades. With its history of strong social policies, Tamil Nadu is witnessing a disappearance of landlordism of the older variety; however, Dalits and women continue to be excluded from better non-agricultural opportunities.

The final set of chapters concerns specific issues addressed by the village studies approach in different regions of the country. The chapter by Himanshu, Peter Lanjouw, Rinku Murgai, and Nicholas Stern discusses the expansion of non-farm opportunities in Palanpur. While these opportunities have improved the living conditions of all social groups, they have also led to increasing inequalities within the village. Nevertheless, the process of non-farm diversification has had a positive impact on overall income levels of the poor, and, in some ways, has broken social and ritual barriers to mobility.

Judith Heyer's paper on multi-caste villages in the textile region of Coimbatore and Tiruppur of Tamil Nadu also focuses on the positive impact of non-farm diversification of work and incomes on people of the Gounder caste. Heyer, who has spent the last three decades researching the region, notes that, apart from conventional markers of income and land, the process of slow integration with the local industrial and non-farm sector has led to improved education, particularly for girls.

Janine Rodgers presents the findings of village surveys undertaken in Bihar in 1981–3, 1998–9, and 2009–11. Changes in the labour market in rural Bihar have been extremely significant over the last three decades. Men have migrated and found jobs outside the village while women have stayed back, leading to a feminisation of the agricultural work force. This has meant contraction of the rural labour market, with higher wages and reduction of the gender gap in wages.

Amrita Datta uses the same long-term database to highlight key drivers of change with respect to migration. Men from Bihar have been migrating for more than a hundred years, and this trend of migration cannot be captured by the binary of “push” and “pull” factors. Various economic and cultural factors affect the decision to migrate. Datta's longitudinal study presents data to establish that the pattern of migration from Bihar is circular and temporary.

The chapter by Dipa Sinha, Dinesh Kumar Tiwari, Ruchira Bhattacharya, and Ruth Kattumuri begins by noting that real incomes have risen substantially for all caste groups in the village of Palanpur. This chapter focuses on the poor provisioning of public services and human development outcomes in terms of education, health, and nutrition. Further, it examines the possibilities of collective action in a society fragmented by caste and other divisions.

The chapter by R. Ramakumar is based on a resurvey of a village in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, and documents a rise in landlessness in the village from 28 per cent in 1963 to 64 per cent in 2007. Land ownership in the village has been highly unequal, and land continued to be an important marker of social and economic power.

The last chapter in the volume, which is by Barbara Harriss-White, is a unique long-term study of Arni town in Tamil Nadu. The chapter is a response to the limitations of the village studies framework, contextualised within rapidly changing global, national, and regional processes of accumulation and work. While most of the studies in the volume highlight the transition from agricultural workers to casual workers, or non-farm diversification as a driver of rural transformation in contemporary India, Harriss-White responds to these observations from the other side of the transition, i. e., the urban sphere. She points to the fact that caste plays a large role in labour market segmentation. The chapter argues that petty producers cannot be termed disguised wage labour, and that only long-term engagement can enable us to understand how capitalism operates in micro-institutional forms.

CONCLUSION

The volume under review is an important contribution to the literature on village studies in India. Its importance lies in bringing together, for academia and policy-makers, a diverse set of encounters with a society in transition. It is a testimony to the strength of micro-level, long-term engagements with a village or a town (Harriss-White), a set of villages or a region (Heyer). The insights gained from this approach of understanding change can provide a critical overview of development policies and the processes of social change. A number of issues related to longitudinal research of the micro/village variety have been addressed in the volume either directly or indirectly; these include problems of comparability, attribution of causality, the role of researchers over time, and the impossibility of replication.

Village-level longitudinal studies have made possible the study of cultural and ideological contexts in which caste, class, and labour prevail, and the “cultural and political embedding” of economic institutions (Harriss 2008). At the current stage of India’s development, such insights are urgently required. The studies in this volume point toward a future research agenda (issues addressed in part by Judith Heyer and Barbara Harriss-White in their contributions). Village-based longitudinal studies need to move to region-based studies of processes of institutional change, regimes of accumulation, forms and freedoms available to labour, and issues of caste and gender. This does not mean that the village ceases to have significance in our research agenda. In fact, an important conclusion that can be drawn from the articles in this volume is that issues of land and caste continue to hamper the opportunities available to oppressed social groups such as Dalits and women, even in the non-farm sphere. Hence, the emerging agrarian picture is one of limited dynamism with strong roots in social backwardness, which is yet to be overcome.

REFERENCES

Beteille, A. (1974), *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Beteille, A. (1979), "Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 529–48.

Beteille, A. (1996), *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Breman, Jan (1974), *Patronage and Exploitation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Byres, T. J. (1986), "The Agrarian Question, Forms of Capitalist Agrarian Transition and the State: An Essay with Reference to Asia," *Social Scientist*, nos. 162–3, Nov–Dec.

Connell, John, and Lipton, Michael (1977), *Assessing Village Labour Situations in Developing Countries*, Village Studies Programme, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex.

Dasgupta, Biplob (1975), "A Typology of Village Socio-Economic Systems: From Indian Village Studies," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 10, nos. 33–35, pp. 1395–414.

Dasgupta, Biplob (1978), *Village Studies in the Third World*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.

Epstein, T. Scarlett, Suryanarayana, A. P., and Thimmegowda, T. (1998), *Village Voices: Forty Years of Rural Transformation in South India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Gough, Kathleen (1989), *Rural Change in Southeast India: 1950s to 1980s*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Harriss, John (1982), *Capitalism and Peasant Farming: Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu*, Oxford University Press, Bombay.

Harriss, John (2008), "Notes on Village Studies: From an Anthropological Perspective," paper presented at the conference on "Studying Village Economies in India: A Colloquium on Methodology," organised by the Sociological Research Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, Chalsa, Dec. 21–24.

Herring, Ronald J., and Agarwala, Rina (2006), "Introduction: Restoring Agency to Class: Puzzles from the Subcontinent," *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 323–56.

Himanshu, Jha, Praveen, and Rodgers, Gerry (eds.) (2016), *The Changing Village in India: Insights from Longitudinal Research*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Hoben, Allan, and Timberg, Thomas (1980), "Micro and Macro Data in Village India: A Note," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 15, no. 48, pp. 2019–22.

Hockings, Paul (1999), "Replication in Village-Level Studies," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 40, pp. 2867–74.

Inden, Ronald (1990), *Imagining India*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Jayaraman, R., and Lanjouw, Peter (1999), "The Evolution of Poverty and Inequality in Indian Villages," *The World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1–30.

Jodhka, Surinder (1998), "From 'Book View' to 'Field View': Social Anthropological Constructions of the Indian Village," Working Paper No. 5, QEH Working Paper Series, Queen Elizabeth House, London; republished in *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 311–31.

Jodhka, Surinder (2002), “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 32, pp. 3343–53.

Marriott, McKim (ed.) (1955), *Village India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Mayer, A. C. (1960), *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and Its Region*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Mukherjee, Ramakrishna (1976), “The Value-Base of Social Anthropology: The Context of India in Particular,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 71–95.

Nagaraj, K. (2008), “Selecting a Study Village,” paper presented at the conference on “Studying Village Economies in India: A Colloquium on Methodology,” organised by the Sociological Research Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, Chalsa, Dec. 21–24.

Omvedt, G. (1979), “The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden: An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer,” *Signs*, vol. 4, no. 4: “The Labour of Women: Work and Family,” Summer, pp. 763–74.

Ramachandran, V. K. (1990), *Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Indian Agriculture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Slater, Gilbert (1918), *Economic Studies (Volume 1): Some South Indian Villages*, Oxford University Press, Madras.

Srinivas, M. N. (1957), “Caste in Modern India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 529–48.

Srinivas, M. N. (1987), “The Indian Village: Myth and Reality,” in *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 20–59.

Sundar, Nandini, Deshpande, Satish, and Uberoi, Patricia (2000), “Indian Anthropology and Sociology: Towards a History,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no. 24, pp. 1998–2002.

Thorner, Daniel (1967), “Social and Economic Studies of Dr Mann,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 2, no. 13, pp. 642–5.